

## One Road, Separate Storms

by Michael Channing

He lay on the asphalt broken, bleeding. The old man sat next to him, very calm, held up a pair of glasses. "I got em right here. See?" The glasses were unharmed, save for a smear of blood across one lens.

The old man slipped the glasses into his shirt pocket. "I'll keep em for now. Don't you worry. Somebody's coming."

Everything a blur: the road he'd walked everyday, the van on the shoulder with its windshield smeared like the lens of his glasses. The van so far away. How far had he flown when it struck him? So terribly far away.

Someone was coming. The clack of boots on blacktop. But the old man didn't hear, didn't see the dark one in his denim jacket, yellow smiley on the lapel. "Got yourself in quite a mess, didn't ya partner?"

Behind the dark one, his other companions. The clown with the sharpened teeth and layers of faces. The woman chewing her lip till it bled.

"You're busted up pretty good," the dark one said. "Fraid this might be the end of our little partnership."

The woman at his side now. "You're a bad man for leaving us. For leaving the job undone real men get the job done." She ripped out a tassel of hair to show how much he hurt her. "I gave you..." Eyes clenched and weeping. "Every piece of me. And you..." She loped to the other side of the road, pounding her fist into her temple.

"I called em," the old man said. Unaware of his companions. "I told em your name. They'll be coming quick like."

The dark one again stood over him. "Maybe not fast enough, eh partner? Shame. So much left to

do, you and us. We were gonna make our way to the tower, split that thing open like a pomegranate. But now. I think you're over."

Always the tower. He could see it now, down the road. The spire stabbed the sky like a needle binding earth to air. No matter how much he wrote it never came nearer. But sometimes he would catch the scent of roses, and he would bend again to his work. No more. The work would go undone. The whispering of his companions, the haunt of that tower on the horizon, would fade forever, and he would never know the reason for the stories or why he'd been chosen to write.

The clown danced next to him. It wore his wife's face. "I knew you weren't good enough. Now what'll we do?" The clown tore off its face, and beneath was the skin of his oldest son. "Knew you were weak. Knew you'd let us down. What are we going to do now?"

"That, partner, is the problem. Ain't it? You see, we got a lotta stories left. We gotta get ourselves on down the road. But you. You ain't the one who's gonna get us there."

The sun that haloed around the dark one's head was blinding. "I know we done some things to you in the past. Shown you things that were... unpleasant. But this. This is probably gonna hurt more than anything else."

The woman held an axe. She hefted it to her shoulder, crying tears of blood, brought the blade up and swung.

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Like a carnival. That was how the old man thought of the scene in the middle of County Road 217. Red and blue lights flashed. Gawkers gathered at the yellow tape stretched across the blacktop. You could set up a popcorn stand and make a pretty good go at it. The old man watched as the ambulance pulled away and started up its song. Like one of them pipe organs on a merry-go-round. What were they called? Calliopes. The siren sounded like a calliope.

The police asked him the same questions for the third time. He told them how he only turned his

head for a moment and by the time he saw the man walking beside the road it was too late. He didn't tell them about the horrid thump as the van made contact, or about the sound of the body cracking against the pavement.

He also didn't tell the police what happened just before they got there. The writer looked at him, crying. "I can't see them anymore," he said. "They're gone." Then the carnival rolled up, and the old man didn't have the chance to ask what the writer meant.

There ought to be thunder, the old man thought. Ought to be a dry wind and the green smell of leaves and ozone in the air. That kind of weather goes good with carnivals.

One of the rubbernecking crowd hoping for a glimpse of the Incredible Bleeding Man ought to go home and read everything the writer wrote, slowly, looking for hidden signs. Another ought to buy a razor blade and sit in front of the television and wait for the news to tell him of the writer's fate before deciding on his own. That policeman staring at him, hand on his nightstick, ought to show up tonight at the old man's house dressed in black.

These thoughts frightened him. They were like home movies of other people's lives playing in his head. He looked up at the sky.

Ought to rain for just a minute, he thought. Just enough to wash away the blood and give everything a slick glaze. Far away, a sound of thunder. The wind stirred the scent of earth and roses.

Heat lightning lit the distance, as if the carnival had spread to encompass the whole world. He saw something above the trees. A tall, thin building, dark as a keyhole.

He heard a noise, boot heels scuffling on the hard packed road. He turned, but no one was there.